

Healer

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Category: StarTrek: Deep Space Nine  
Language: English  
Characters: J. Bashir  
Status: Completed  
Published: 1999-08-10 09:00:00  
Updated: 1999-08-10 09:00:00  
Packaged: 2016-04-27 10:43:13  
Rating: K  
Chapters: 1  
Words: 7,755  
Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)  
Summary: Quickening sequel: Trevean is dying and Dr. Bashir is invited to the ceremony.

Healer

**\*\*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine\*\***

**\*\*Healer\*\***

By Gabrielle Lawson

Winner: 2nd place Best Deep Space Nine Story, .-Ages Tribble Awards 1998

This story is available in print!

It's been scrunched down to only 10 pages (scrunched, not cut!) and it includes cover art. For details, see my web site's Stories in Print page.

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><p><em>Captain's Log: Stardate 50746.3. Starfleet has been contacted by a Vulcan research vessel in the Obatta system in the Gamma Quadrant. The <em>V'Sul\_ disappeared three months ago and was assumed destroyed or taken by the Jem'Hadar. The Defiant has been dispatched to investigate.\_

"Captain," Kira said with subdued urgency, "I'm picking up a modified distress signal."

Dax swivelled her chair to look at the major. "Modified?"

"It's an automated signal," Kira confirmed, "one we've heard before. But this one's for Julian."

Curious, Captain Sisko wanted to have her put it on audio. But it was 'addressed' to the doctor. He tapped a control opening a comm signal. "Bashir to the bridge."

Bashir answered almost immediately, "On my way."

"Major," Sisko asked while he waited for the doctor to arrive, "Where's the signal coming from?"

"Boranis Three," she answered, but she was looking at Dax.

"Has something gone wrong?" Dax asked, her brows furrowed with worry. "The children?"

Kira shook her head, but didn't have time to answer. The turbolift doors opened on the other side of the bridge. Dr. Julian Bashir stepped out and came to his customary position just behind and to the left of the captain's chair. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"You have a message," Sisko told him and then turned toward Kira. "Major."

Kira turned her chair back around to face her console and pressed a few controls. "We can skip the general message. It's outdated anyway." Finally she had the message set to begin with the modified portion. "Audio only," she warned the others.

Then a male voice replaced hers as the message began to play. "Dr. Bashir," the gentle voice began almost serenely, "the time has come."

Dax spun around to look at Julian. "Trevean," she whispered.

The message continued. "You gave me a new hope I thought I'd lost forever. You have changed my life. And I would be honored if you were here to share the end of it. I will wait for you as long as I can. I will understand if you cannot attend." Trevean's voice paused for just a moment. "In case I don't see you: Thank you." The message ended and began to repeat from the beginning with its centuries-old distress call. Kira cut it off and the bridge was silent.

Everyone was watching Bashir, but he hadn't moved. He seemed stunned and stricken. He stared at the forward viewscreen as if he could see Trevean's face there. Sisko remembered the report the doctor filed after his two-month stay on Boranis Three and how hard Bashir had pushed himself for months afterward to find a cure for the blight, the disease the Jem'Hadar had unleashed on the inhabitants centuries ago for their defiance.

"Doctor?" Sisko prodded.

Finally, Bashir stirred. "The message," his own voice barely above a whisper, "how old is it?"

Kira had anticipated his question and was prepared with the answer.  
"Four days."

Bashir turned. "Captain?" was all he said, but his eyes pleaded.

Sisko hesitated. They had orders and, with the Dominion in the Alpha Quadrant, being in the Gamma Quadrant was even more dangerous than before. They might need the doctor. He glanced around the bridge. Worf, at tactical, had returned his attention to his station. O'Brien returned Sisko's gaze with curiosity. But Dax and Kira each had the same look in their eyes as Julian. They'd been there. Dax had seen the planet and the blight. And she'd seen Julian try to fight it. She knew what it meant to him.

So he gave in. "Set course for Boranis Three, Old Man."

A slight smile graced her face as she nodded and then turned to change course.

"We can't wait for you, Doctor," Sisko warned Bashir. "We'll come back for you in three days."

Bashir nodded. "I understand." He stepped a little closer to Dax. "How long?"

"We should make orbit in twenty minutes," she answered.

At that the doctor again fell silent. He simply nodded and turned quickly on his heels for the turbolift.

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><p>Fifteen minutes later, Bashir was in the transporter room nervously pacing across the room. It was a small room and only allowed him a few steps before he'd have to turn around and continue the other way. The only other person in the room was the transporter officer, and she tried to keep her eyes on her station, but she looked up occasionally to eye him with a hint of annoyance. He could have paced in his quarters or out in the corridor.<p>

"Sisko to Bashir."

He stopped mid-stride and tapped his comm badge urgently, worried, and just a little hopeful, that something had gone wrong. "Bashir here."

"We'll be entering orbit in two minutes, Doctor," the captain said. "Prepare for transport."

At just that moment the door opened and Dax entered the room. She took one look at him and then put on one of her motherly smiles. She put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure they'll be happy to see you, Julian."

"It's been a year, Jadzia," he said, a pained expression in his eyes. "How many have died in the last year?"

"How many have been born?" she retorted gently. "You gave them their children, Julian. I've been a parent, several times. I know it's the

best thing you could have given them."

The transporter officer spoke up. "Entering orbit, sir."

"Are you going to be alright, Julian?" Dax asked with concern, her smile gone now.

Julian didn't answer. He knew she was asking about how he'd handle Trevean's death. He had found him appalling when they'd first met. Trevean had administered poison to a young woman suffering from the quickening, the last stages of the blight. "It's been four days," he finally said, referring to the message. "Do you think it's already happened?" he asked.

Dax thought for a moment and then nodded. "I think he would wait for you. I wish I could come with you."

Bashir smiled then, one of his well-practiced smiles that he used when he really didn't feel like smiling. He stepped onto the transporter pad and lifted his bag to his shoulder. "I'll be fine. It's only for three days."

Dax's smile returned, a gentle, sad turning up of the lips. "Energize."

Julian Bashir rematerialized in the bright sunlight of afternoon on Boranis Three, just as it had been the year before when he and Jadzia had first beamed down. But then, there had been a quiet weariness to the atmosphere. Now there was a bustle of activity. Where they'd been very nearly ignored before, Bashir's arrival did not go unnoticed.

A child spotted him first. A little girl, perhaps seven or eight-years-old, with long brown hair and green, star-shaped lesions marking her face and arms and legs. She grinned widely when she saw him, and her face lit up. "He's come!" she cried and then ran off to tell everyone she knew. "He's here!"

And everyone within earshot turned to see what she was yelling about. Within a few minutes a crowd had formed around the young doctor, calling his name, telling him of the children that had been born, of all he meant to them, reaching out to try and touch him. But there were only two things Bashir could think of. One of them did him no good at all, and he tried to push it away. The other was urgent, and he shouted to be heard over the din of the crowd. "Where's Trevean?"

Trevean lay in a long, dark bed, shivering beneath several tattered blankets. Sweat lined his brow, which one of his assistants dutifully dabbed with a wet cloth. As Julian entered, he couldn't help but be reminded of Ekorla. How many times had he entered the room to see her shivering the same way, clutching the blankets in pain until her knuckles were white with the strain? A tightness began to form in Bashir's throat.

The assistant finally noticed him standing in the doorway and stood. "He's here," he whispered to Trevean before nodding to Julian as he slipped passed him out the door.

Trevean turned his head to see him better, and Julian took a few

tentative steps toward the man. It was only on his last day on the planet last year that Trevean had seemed to trust him, perhaps even to like him. And then, Julian had wondered if it was only for the vaccine he had found. Of course, he knew it was, to a point. Without the vaccine, Trevean would never have seen that he wasn't just another fraud promising miracles to a world that was beyond them.

Trevean had seen him as a threat, not only to himself, his own prestige, but also to his people, offering them false hope in a cure that was not forthcoming. Only Ekoría had trusted Julian for who he was, even when he couldn't promise her a thing.

"Doctor, please," Trevean rasped out before drawing in a ragged breath. He held out his hand and, despite his pain, he smiled.

Forgetting his own uncertainty, Julian felt the doctor in himself take over. He smiled warmly in return and stepped confidently to the side of the bed. Sitting in the chair the attendant had left, Julian took the hand that was offered. "Trevean, how do you feel?"

"Better now that you're here," the man said. It was a lot to say, and it caused him to cough. Bashir helped him to sit up a little higher where it might be easier to breathe. "I was afraid," he said and took a deep breath, "that you wouldn't get my message. Or that you wouldn't come."

Julian let go of the smile he didn't feel anyway. "Trevean," he said, trying his best to sound as sincere as he felt, knowing all it would entail, "I would be honored to attend your death. I only wish," he continued, his voice dropping to a whisper, "that I could tell you that you didn't have to die."

"You haven't found a cure." Trevean hadn't asked it. He'd stated it as a simple fact.

Those words weighed a great deal to Julian Bashir. He had worked through the night after returning to the station, until he'd fallen asleep in his chair. And even then, he'd dreamed of base-pair sequences and viral DNA. He'd never forgotten the blight, not even when his duties took him elsewhere, not even in the Jem'Hadar prison. He'd felt a mission for these people, as if he were the only one holding the one end of the rope that kept them from sliding forever into the abyss. But the longer he held on, without a cure, the farther they slipped. And he couldn't help but imagine the number of new deaths that had come about this last year. Julian lowered his eyes and shook his head.

Trevean regarded him solemnly, the pain gone from his eyes, if only for a moment. "This is not your fault, Bashir."

Julian knew he was telling the truth. The blight, the quickening, Ekoría's death and now Trevean's, these were not his fault. The Jem'Hadar, the Dominion had inflicted them. But still the weight remained. Jadzia hadn't quite understood before, when the others had died and when he'd almost given up. He couldn't have told her then, but he had a gift--or a burden, depending on one's particular point-of-view. His enhanced genetics gave him an intellectual advantage over most other doctors. He should have been able to find a

cure, even if all the others had failed. He was supposed to be better. But he had failed. The people of Boranis Three were still dying, and all his enhanced genes hadn't been able to stop it.

"Have you seen the boy?" Trevean asked, suddenly smiling again.

Julian looked up. \_Ekoria's boy?\_ "I came straight to see you."

Trevean's smile faded for a moment as he winced and closed his eyes. He took in a sharp breath and held it. Julian instinctively reached for the tricorder he knew he didn't have with him. The EM radiation from his equipment would only have made things worse, as it had for Epran and the others who had volunteered to help him, sacrificing their death ceremonies for the pain of the quickening, so that Bashir might be able to find an antigen to fight the virus. "I can give you something for the pain," he offered.

Trevean nodded and Julian opened the small med-kit he'd brought with him. It held only a single hypospray and two medicines. He placed one vial in the bottom of the hypospray and held the instrument to Trevean's neck. Finally, Trevean let the breath out and then continued as if nothing were wrong. "We won't have the celebration until tonight. You should visit with him. And the other children, too."

"Celebration?" Julian still found it difficult to view death as something to be celebrated and worshiped, even as he admitted it as a release from pain.

"I have a lot to celebrate, Bashir," Trevean said before another coughing fit took hold of him. Julian found a glass of water by the bed and held it to Trevean's lips. When he'd finished drinking, he continued, "You, for example. And hope. I have a hope that my father and grandfather and my grandfather's grandfather didn't have. I know that someday my world will be free of the blight."

Before he could stop himself, Julian whispered, "But you won't be here to see it."

Despite the seriousness in Julian's statement, Trevean laughed. It was a weak laugh, given his condition, but a deep laugh just the same. "That hardly matters. It will happen nonetheless. Now go, see your child." And to force Julian to obey, Trevean rolled over and closed his eyes.

\* \* \*

><p><em>My child?<em> Julian thought as he stepped back out into the sunlight. Though it was late in the afternoon, the contrast from the darkness in the room caused him to squint as he looked out onto the city. His child. Why had Trevean said it that way? The boy was Ekoria's and her husband's, who had died before the baby was born. Bashir had only been there the last couple of months of Ekoria's pregnancy and had only held the baby on the day of his birth. He wouldn't even be able to recognize the one-year-old child the baby had become. Besides, Ekoria had loved her husband. Saying that the child was Bashir's seemed disrespectful, to the father and to the mother who loved and missed him so.

From where he stood, Bashir could see Ekorias house, or the building where she had lived. Where he had lived the two months that he stayed with her. He almost felt that if he walked up that hill and stepped inside that he'd see her again, lying in bed. The tightness in his throat hardened to a painful knot.

One of Trevean's assistants tapped his arm. Startled, Julian turned to see the man who had been tending Trevean inside. "Trevean said you'd want to see the Laron."

"Laron?"

"Ekorias child," the man explained, grinning widely. "He'll be happy to see you. Come."

The attendant led him through a maze of streets and alleys to a new part of the city, just at the border to the old. A new building was there. Bashir recognized it from the painting Ekorias husband had painted. The style was the same as all the others in the old city, but this one was bright and painted in cheerful colors. He could see curtains hanging in the long windows. The yard in front of it gleamed a bright green in the overhead sun. Knowing the climate, Bashir surmised that they had to irrigate the yard by hand.

Children played there, laughing happily as they chased each other through the grass. All of them were marked by green lesions on their faces or limbs. Their clothes were ragged in contrast to their surroundings.

"This is for the children," the man said, smiling with pride. "There are three others like this in the city. All children are welcome. Some of them live here, others just come to play. We never want for people to care for them. Not anymore." He touched Bashir's arm. "The younger ones will be inside."

Where the other buildings had been dark inside, this one was well lit with candles posted high on the walls. A tall woman, middle-aged, with deep wrinkles around her eyes stepped forward. She was dressed in a long white coat. "Dr. Bashir," she said, holding out her hand, "I'd heard you were coming."

Bashir took the hand, nodding while he waited for an introduction. It didn't take long. "Yalena is our healer for babies and pregnant women."

"You have certainly made my job a lot more pleasant, Doctor."

Bashir met her eyes, saw the joy there. Still, it didn't ease the knot in his throat. "I wish I could have done more."

Sensing the awkward moment, Trevean's assistant stepped back from them. "I really must be getting back to Trevean. Yalena will show you everything. He smiled again and left Bashir with the woman. Bashir hoped she'd take him directly to the child, but she was intent on giving him a tour. They started up a long flight of stairs.

The first room she took him to was painted with children's drawings from floor to ceiling. The walls were lined with chairs. One desk sat beside another doorway. In each chair sat a woman waiting her turn

for examination. Sixteen of them were there. Julian felt guilty. Their doctor was busy giving him a tour. But the women didn't seem to mind. They smiled at him, beamed actually. Some of them waved and thanked him. A couple of them looked older than Bashir, probably nearing the end of their child-bearing years. He understood why they would still try to have a child despite the risks involved. Their children would survive now. Most of the others were young, barely passed their teens.

As they passed another room, he heard a woman giving birth. They passed another flight of stairs, the sounds of laughing children filtered up from the floor below. Julian looked down and saw a group of faces staring back at him. Little faces. Children, with their lesions, looked up at him, their eyes wide with fear and wonder. All sound had stopped the instant he did at the top of the stairs.

"They are still hoping," Yalena whispered, taking his arm. Bashir reluctantly turned, allowing her to lead him away from the children. They walked quietly for a few minutes until Yalena stopped at another doorway.

"Some of the mothers who come here are already quickening," she said. She pulled back the light blue blanket that formed its door. "Before, they'd choose to go ahead with the ceremony. Now they come here. We're able to save some of the children."

Inside the room were nearly a dozen beds. Only two of them were empty. Some of the women there were sleeping, others were laying, like Ekorla, shivering and in pain. One of them moaned loudly. Bashir stepped further into the room. "How do you help them?"

"Marke root, mostly," Yalena answered. "We make a tea out of it. It dulls the pain. And salve for the lesions, like you made. It helps a little."

Bashir was moving toward the moaning woman. She was lying on her side, her legs tucked up toward her belly as far as she could get them. The blanket that covered her was wadded in her white fingers. "May I?" he asked, looking to Yalena.

She nodded. "Of course."

Wishing again for his tricorder, Bashir gave the woman a brief examination. She had a fever. Her pulse was racing unevenly. Her breath came in shallow pants while her body shook violently. She was in the advanced stages of quickening. She'd be dead before the Defiant came to pick him up. "How much longer?"

"Normally, three months," Yalena said, joining him at her side. "The baby is still small."

"She's been receiving the vaccine?" Bashir's thoughts were coming quickly. Could the child be saved? They could force the birth of the baby, but it would be very premature. It would be difficult to save it on the station. It would be impossible here.

Yalena nodded. "We've tried to tell her," she whispered, "that the baby won't be born in time." Bashir knew what she was hinting at. They would give her the drug to kill her if the woman would let them. "But she insists on waiting."



Bashir remembered how Ekorla had gently refused Trevean's offer a year ago. He didn't want to let this woman down. But the baby was still too small. He thought of Keiko O'Brien and Kirayoshi. How he'd saved them both with Kira's help. He knew there would be any number of women who would volunteer to carry this woman's child to term, but there was no way to perform the transfer. He didn't even have the minimum medical equipment a runabout carried. He brushed some loose hair out of the woman's face. "I'm sorry," he whispered to her.

He took out his hypospray and held it to the woman's neck. She tried to lift a hand to stop him, but she was too weak. He knew what she thought. She thought he was trying to kill her. Bashir shook his head. "It's alright. It's only for the pain."

She relented and the hypospray hissed against her neck. Almost instantly, her tensed muscles relaxed. Her lips turned up momentarily into a thin little smile and then she closed her eyes. Her breath came more deeply and her pulse relaxed. He had given her more than he gave Trevean. She would sleep for a few hours.

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><p>They visited all the other rooms, but Julian hardly noticed them. His mind was on that woman. And she reminded him of Ekorla. Except Ekorla had lived long enough to see her child. Just long enough.<p>

Finally, Yalena led Bashir down back down the stairs. One large room had been made into a playroom. The faces that had greeted him earlier from the bottom of the stairs were there waiting for him when he descended. They stopped playing and looked expectantly at Yalena. The little girl who had announced his presence to the whole city earlier was there in the center of the small group. She smiled. He remembered her from the year before. She had lived in the same building as Ekorla.

"Children," Yalena was saying, "this is Doctor Bashir."

Julian didn't really hear her. He was drawn instead to the wall beyond the children. Like the building, the wall was curved. Two doors, one opening to the yard outside and the other leading further into the building, divided the wall into three sections. On the left was a copy of the mural painted by Ekorla's husband, showing the city as it had been in the time before the Dominion and the blight. The right was painted in the same style. However, it showed the city from a different angle. The sun shone brightly, gleaming on the new buildings. Happy, well-dressed people shopped in a market in the city square or lingered in the streets to talk with friends. Bashir could see farmland in the distance.

The center panel could have been a photograph of the city beyond the grassy, green yard. Old buildings, broken windows, a dull bleak sky. But just in the center of that mural was a group of people in ragged clothes gathering around a pair of hands that reached above them from the center of the crowd. In those hands was a baby, wrapped loosely in a worn blanket. Julian remembered that scene. He had witnessed it a year ago, just before he called for transport.

A small hand tugged on his jacket. "That's you," said the little

girl. She pointed to a lone figure, dressed in black, standing against the wind on a broken doorway watching the crowd. "That's the past," she continued, pointing to the left. "And that's the future." She pointed to the opposite side. "Because of you."

Bashir looked down at her small face, her smooth young skin marred by the ugly green lesions that afflicted her people. She wouldn't see that future. He couldn't help her. But she didn't seem to dwell on that. He knelt down and she grabbed his elbow, pulling him closer.

"I'm going to be like Ekorria," she whispered as if it was the greatest of secrets. "I'm going to have a child who will live in that picture. Like Laron and the others." She smiled broadly and Julian tried to smile back. But it was hard. His throat hurt too much.

She didn't seem to notice. She spun quickly and stood straight, almost like she was coming to attention. "May I take Dr. Bashir to the nursery?"

Yalena looked to Bashir with concerned eyes that seemed to ask if the little girl was being a pest.

"We've . . . met before," Julian explained.

"Of course, Mahara." Yalena also smiled, but Julian could tell she was disappointed. Her lips were too tight, too tense for a real smile. She had wanted to show him the child.

"You will be coming with us, of course?" Julian offered, hoping to be diplomatic.

The tension in her face eased and her smile became genuine. "Of course," she nodded. "This way."

Mahara--he'd never heard the girl's name last time--grabbed his hand and pulled him along after Yalena. They went past a few doors and entered another bright room, this one with windows looking away from the city toward the fields and mountains in the distance. Here small cradles held tiny infants, each with perfect pink skin. Mahara practically tiptoed as she walked through the room. Yalena walked with sure, prideful steps. "These children don't have parents any longer," she explained. "Those that do, live at home."

"Will they be adopted?" Julian asked, looking from child to child. A few of the older ones grinned happily and he couldn't help but smile in turn. There were other beds there. But they were empty.

"Not as such," Yalena explained. "The whole city raises children here. Most lose their parents before they grow up. Like Mahara. Now they have many parents. Everyone cares for them. It will be the same with these children."

Julian nodded that he understood. Even if they were adopted, the babies' new parents would most likely die within a few years, leaving them orphans again.

"For now, they live with us, here," she continued. "But they may chose to live elsewhere when they're older. Laron is the oldest, of course. He still lives with us."

She pulled back the blanket that led into the next room. This room was slightly larger and painted with pictures of animals like Bashir had never seen. Perhaps twenty toddlers raced around the room, either walking or crawling. Either way, they made a racket, laughing and playing with each other or their simple toys. Some repeated syllables or even whole words over and over. Three adults stood when he entered, a woman and two men. "Laron," one of the men said, grabbing one of the children as he ran past, "this is Doctor Bashir."

The child had been chasing one of the other toddlers, a little girl and seemed to be annoyed with the interruption of his play. But the sight of the stranger scared him. He hugged tight to the man, burying his face in the his shoulder. He peeked one eye back at Bashir. Julian could only see that one eye, but he knew the boy looked just like his mother.

"You don't remember me," Julian said, moving one step closer, "but I remember you."

"Doctor Bashir took care of you mother," the man told the baby, "when she was sick. He tried to make her better. He made sure you weren't sick."

"Would you like to go to the garden, Laron?" Yalena asked him.

"Garrrr!" Laron cried, looking up from the man's shoulder. He pointed out the door.

"Yes," Yalena assured him, "you can go to the garden. Doctor Bashir would like to take you to the garden to play."

At that, Laron nearly threw himself out of the man's arms. All his shyness disappeared as he leaned out toward Bashir, hands stretched out to grab his uniform. Julian took the clue and lifted the little boy from the man's hands. "Gar!" he ordered, grinning widely.

Yalena laughed. "He's a very friendly little boy. I'll show you the way."

\* \* \*

><p>Laron's vocabulary proved to be limited to single syllables and his attention span to only ten seconds. He loved the grassy garden and ran on his little feet from one end of the fenced in yard to the other. He was interested in the bugs crawling through the grass, and even the grass itself. Julian had to chase after him just to make sure he didn't stick any of it in his mouth. It seemed to be a particular favorite activity of the boy. He giggled incessantly at just about anything and was apparently a very happy little child. Julian looked him over as well as he could when the boy didn't wiggle away to pick a weed near the fence or wave at a passing cloud. He saw no sign of lesions, no evidence of the blight. He had been worried that the children would contract the disease anyway, just at a later age. One year, so far.<p>

Finally, after what seemed like hours, Laron grew tired and more interested in his visitor. He was particularly drawn to his shiny communications badge. Laron crawled into Julian's lap where he was

sitting under the one lonely sapling in the garden. He fingered the badge and tried to pull it off. He seemed content there and leaned back into Julian's arms. Not really knowing what else to say to the little boy, Julian began to sing to him. The sun began to set just as the boy's eyes closed and Trevean's assistant came to tell him it was time.

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><p><em>Dj vu<em>. The scene he walked into was exactly the same as it had been a year before. Only this time, he didn't have Dax to go with him. The hospital was dark. Music played softly from the corner where a young boy was turning a crank on something reminiscent of an old Victrola. In every corner of the room a short table was placed, covered with food and lit by a small oil lamp. The last rays of the reddening sun shone in through the torn ceiling and spaces in the walls. Trevean sat in one corner, propped up by pillows. Around each table, people sat on pillows, eating and drinking a meager feast. But still the mood was subdued. Trevean's death was overdue.

One pillow remained empty at Trevean's table. With obvious effort, Trevean smiled and extended his hand, indicating that the place had been saved for Bashir. A golden goblet sat on the table in front of Trevean and Julian knew what it was for. Bashir stepped carefully between the diners and sat down cross-legged on the pillow. He looked to Trevean. "Can I give you something for the pain?"

Trevean nodded. "That would be," he answered, clenching his teeth, "most appreciated."

Bashir opened his bag and pressed the hypospray to Trevean's neck. Trevean relaxed almost immediately. He smiled and closed his eyes, and Bashir was worried that he'd fall asleep, ruining his ceremony. But his eyes opened again. "Please," he said, his voice much less strained, "eat. I've been saving this meal for many years." His assistant stepped close to the table, holding a pitcher of something which he poured into a cup in front of Bashir. "Did you have any of our vlessa juice when you were with us before?" Trevean asked.

"I don't know," Julian answered honestly remembering his many meals with Ekorla. He had done his best with the unfamiliar fruits and vegetables he found. At first, Ekorla would tell him how to prepare them, but after a few weeks she'd been unable to do that. Speaking had been too much of a strain. He sipped at the juice and found it sweet and refreshing after the dry dusty air outside. "It's quite good."

"There used to be many vlessa trees in this region," Trevean told him. "There will be again. Thanks to you."

Bashir didn't know what to say. He knew these people were grateful to him, but he couldn't feel their gratitude. He couldn't get it past the regret he had that they would not see their world revived. He took another sip of the juice.

Trevean continued to watch him, smiling sadly. He nodded and one of his other assistants rose from the floor. "Trevean," he said, holding his cup in the air, "you have served us all for so many years. It is our pleasure to serve you today." He sat and a woman rose from her place.

"Trevean," she began, holding her cup to him as the man had done, "you made our lives more pleasant by making our deaths nothing to fear. For all the peace you offered us, we wish you peace today."

Another rose and another, until almost everyone had spoken, sharing their tributes to Trevean. A woman, perhaps only sixteen-years-old stood finally, but she didn't raise her cup. "Trevean, my sister came to you one year ago. Like you, she had already quickened and was in pain. She was brought to you by the man that sits beside you. With a soft heart, you ended her suffering, and in your wisdom told that man to leave. In his stubbornness, he stayed and he showed you a way to save our children. You led us to death for many years, but this last, you led us to life. And when I close my eyes at night, I see that life. It will be a glorious one. Thank you, Trevean." She raised her cup but dipped her head in Julian's direction. "And thank you, Doctor Bashir, for not listening to him."

Trevean laughed and patted Bashir's arm. "This is a glorious evening, is it not?"

Julian smiled in return, seeing the peace in Trevean's eyes, the absolute joy. "It's wonderful," he whispered, not sharing that joy.

Trevean braced his arms on the table and tried to stand. "Would you help me, Doctor?"

Julian jumped up. "Of course." He took Trevean's arm and helped him rise from the floor. The older man held tight to Julian's shoulder, but he managed to stand. "Thank you all, for coming," he said, raising his goblet to them. "It means so much to me to see you smile, to see you dream. I had thought I'd forgotten how. I'm am so glad that I lived to see this day." His voice broke and he took a long drink from the goblet. He handed the glass to the woman on his other side and turned to Bashir, touching his face with his hand. "I did the best that I could for my people because I love them," he whispered. "You didn't even know them, but you did your best too. I am the past, Doctor. You are the future. Thank you for coming to us, for letting me see the day--" His voice became strained again and he clasped Bashir's hand. "When my people could hope . . . again."

He convulsed sharply and began to fall. Bashir held him, eased his descent and laid him back on the pillows with the help of the others near him. Trevean continued to twitch and convulse for a few more seconds, choking on his own breath until finally it stopped. He stopped shaking and lay still against the pillows. His eyes stared, unmoving, at the ceiling. His hand released its hold on Bashir's and Julian felt for a pulse he knew would not be there. Trevean was dead.

\* \* \*

><p>Julian had gone to Ekor's house that night to sleep. Though he had been offered a comfortable bed in Trevean's hospital, he just couldn't stay. He thought about Trevean and how little he knew about the man. They had so distrusted each other in the beginning, one believing the other would bring false hope, the other believing that the one was killing any hope the people had. They'd both been wrong,

each in their own way. Before Trevean's last day, he had only offered Julian perhaps five minutes worth of kind words. But in those five minutes, Julian had seen all the hopelessness drain from Trevean's face at the sight of Ekor's child. He fell asleep remembering that day, Ekor's last.<p>

The next day, he went straight to the hospital, but not to see Laron. He went to help in whatever way he could. Yalena didn't seem to approve. She didn't want to put him to work while he was visiting, but he insisted. Some of the women, knowing that he was there, requested that he examine them and the babies they carried. He was kind to them and joked with them and listened when they talked about their families and their dreams. They were simple dreams, like Ekor had had, to hold her child's hand when he took his first step or to kiss his knee when he fell. These women, since they hadn't quickened yet, might get to do those things. But Julian thought of the women down the hall, the ones who were dying already.

As soon as he could, he excused himself from the examining room and went to see the others. Some were still in the early stages of quickening. Their lesions were inflamed, but they only suffered minor pain. Several were very close to giving birth. But others were feeling the effects, shaking and gritting their teeth against the pain. Most of them still had reason to hope. A week or two and they could deliver. But the one woman was so far gone that she would not be able to survive another day, let alone the three months until her baby was due.

Her name was Eleke and, like Ekor, she had already lost her husband. Her whole family had told her to take the herbs that would end her suffering, but she had disagreed. She had walked to the hospital herself. It had taken her two days. She had arrived at night when everyone was asleep and there was no one to help her. She had crawled halfway up the stairs before anyone had noticed. Since then, they've treated her well, but they still encouraged her to choose death. She refused, knowing that the vaccine had already saved her child from the blight. She knew she would die, but she wanted the child to live.

Julian stayed with her most of the day, applying salve to her lesions and helping her to drink the marke root tea. And sometimes, he just held her hand. He was called away in the afternoon when one of the other women went into labor. Yalena wanted him to assist in the delivery. He saw the longing in Eleke's eyes when he left her. But she was smiling when he returned. She asked about the baby, whether it was a boy or girl, and if it was healthy. And she asked about the mother, whether she had died or lived to hold her child. She had lived. She had been one of those who had only recently quickened. She would survive a few more weeks.

"Good," Eleke said, taking his hand. "She gets to hold him." He had given her some cordrazine to dull the pain a bit, but the hand that held his was very weak. "That's wonderful." She died that evening, still holding his hand.

He spent the rest of the evening with Laron, telling him all about his mother and how courageous she had been, how much she had loved her child, and how much she had wanted him to be born. Laron didn't listen much, but Julian told him anyway, about her smile and her generosity, her understanding. She was the only one who had trusted

him after his first failure. She was the only one who had still believed in him, even more than he did himself. Laron fell asleep in his arms again.

He looked up once the boy was asleep and found Yalena standing in the doorway. "You should get some sleep, too," she whispered as she came to take the sleeping baby from him. Until she said it, Bashir hadn't realized how tired he was or that the sun had gone down. He apologized, but Yalena wouldn't accept it. "There's no need to apologize. I can see why she liked you so much."

Julian wondered how long she'd been standing there listening. But he didn't ask, thinking it would be rude to do so.

She turned to head back into the nursery. "You were very kind to stay with Eleke today and to take care of Laron." She laid the baby in his bed and covered him with a thin blanket.

Two men came with a cart to bury Eleke the next day. Julian went with them as they took her to the cemetery, a long plot of ground about a kilometer from the edge of the city. The graves were laid in rows, with only a few inches of dirt separating them side by side. They were laid out chronologically, he knew from before, unmarked and unkept. The first ones they passed were almost unnoticeable, grown over with grass and weeds. But as they moved on, Julian could make out the boundaries of individual plots. After every ten graves, a small path, barely big enough for the cart, branched off horizontally allowing access to the next long row. They passed row after row, each of them stretching all the way to the foothills in the distance. The grass became thinner as they went, until finally they came to a barren area with mounds of newly disturbed earth. They placed her in the first of ten freshly prepared graves.

There was no ceremony, no words said over her. They simply put her in the ground and covered her body with soil. But Julian found he could not just leave when the others did. He felt differently about death than they did. For them, the ceremony was in dying. The body wasn't important. But he felt it cold to simply bury someone and walk away. He knelt down and smoothed some of the dirt. Then he wrote her name there with his fingers. He knew it wouldn't last, but for a little while, it would be a reminder of her. "I'm sorry," he whispered. Then he rose and walked away.

His throat was hurting again and the wind was stinging his eyes. He stopped for a moment and looked back at the city. From where he stood, it looked alive. Physically, it had changed little from his previous visit, but the atmosphere had lost its harshness. Lights danced in some of the buildings, people still walked along the streets. He looked around him at the immensity of the cemetery, with its monotony of dull green grass blending to reddish-brown earth. This was the city he remembered. He was glad to see it had changed.

One spot of blue in the mass of green caught his eye and he walked toward it. As he did he again felt a familiarity with the setting. He'd come this way before. As he neared the spot, he could see that the color was held by the petals of a small bouquet of flowers. He recognized them too. He had laid them, freshly picked, on Ekor's grave after he'd brought her here. Someone had dried the flowers to make them last. A patch of grass had been removed from her plot and

he could still barely see her name where he'd written it one year before. No doubt, someone had retraced the letters from time to time.

Julian knelt down and traced them again until they were clear. And then he felt he couldn't rise. "It's so different now, Ekorla," he said. "I wish you could see it. They have hope now. And it's all because of you."

THE END

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End  
file.